SUCCESS STORY

WIRELESS INTERNET:
Bridging the digital divide in remote schools

"I'm a better student with CLIC because I can depend on the Internet for fast and accurate information. I can also surf the Web for scholarships."

Shiela Joy Catapan, student

"I really don't know how to thank you people for connecting us to the world."

Violeta Jurhayda Arreola, math teacher, in her first post-CLIC email

Lamitan, a small town in the island-province of Basilan, near Mindanao, was briefly in the international news a few years ago when it became the site of fighting between government forces and the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group. That conflict has ended, but a depressed local economy, lingering security fears and the absence of basic infrastructure such as phone lines kept this remote community locked in isolation.

The geography of the town, of course, remains unchanged, but Lamitan is no longer isolated. Students and teachers of the Lamitan National High School can now freely roam the universe through the internet. With the help of a satellite dish and computers provided by the USAID/Philippines' Computer Literacy and Internet Connection (CLIC) Project, they now have 24-hour access to the World wide Web.

Within days, the CLIC Project transformed the Lamitan school community. Teachers who were using a few tattered and out-dated textbooks quickly downloaded classroom exercises in science, math and English to spark their pupils' interest in learning. Students who used to spend half a day traveling by bus and ferry to Zamboanga City (across the Basilan strait) in order to send an email, were now doing in-depth internet research and chatting with peers across the globe. "My favorite Websites are educational, like MathWorld and National Geographic," says 14-year-old student Rea Tarro.

The CLIC Project, which is implemented under USAID's Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program, is bridging the digital divide between students in "wired" cities and those in hundreds of impoverished and conflict-affected communities of Mindanao previously without access to the internet. Assistance for individual schools may include computers, satellite hook-ups, local area networking, training on systems repair and maintenance, and, for teachers, training in basic computer and Web-related skills. As of May 2005, more than 175 schools in Mindanao had become CLIC beneficiaries, providing internet and computer access for approximately 5,000 teachers and 180,000 students. USAID/Philippines plans to add 200-300 high schools over the next two years.

CLIC works in partnership with parent-teacher-community associations (PTCAs) and local chambers of commerce. While CLIC meets the cost of internet subscriptions for the first year, the PTCAs and chambers then assume the responsibility. For Mindanao students who had been left behind in the information revolution, a whole new world is now just a "CLIC" away.